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A Selection From Vietnam Familiar Quotations

By Philip Geyelin

Editorial Page Editor

Defense Secretary Laird's recent progress report on the Vietnam War has come under a certain amount of criticism from people who apparently have no sense of tradition. Even when allowance is made for the Pentagon's effort to tidy up the Secretary's intended meaning the next day, his declaration that "we have certainly turned the corner in the war" is a worthy addition to any compilation of Familiar Vietnam Quotations.

Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary for Public Affairs Jerry Friedheim was at pains the following day to say that the corner Laird was referring to had to do only with the "tremendous progress" being made in the "Vietnamization" of the war, but he might as well have saved his breath—as Robert McNamara would be the first to testify. Who now recalls, or even knows, that his celebrated 1963 projection of the war's end was not originated by him, that it grew out of a joint mission with Gen. Maxwell Taylor, that it was polished and put out by a large group of White House advisers with the approval of President Kennedy, and that it presupposed no enlargement of the enemy war effort?

That is one rule—that it is the first impression that counts—in these matters.

The second rule is more important, and it is that predictions or appraisals having to do with the course of this war, for whatever purpose they may be made, do not have a record of standing up very well. One can always hope. But the record, which is rich, argues otherwise—argues in fact, for public officials either making the most carefully measured estimates or making none at all and letting the facts, such as they are, speak for themselves.

Mr. Laird's assessment, for example, follows hot on the heels of his boss's much-discussed, much-amended, expression of a "hope" that he could outdo Clark Clifford's timetable for removing all of our ground combat forces by the end of 1970. Mr. Clifford was dealing, incidentally, not in hopes but in the terms of a proposed line of action. But if Mr. Nixon was violating his own injunction, expressed in his first press conference ("I do not think it is helpful to make overly optimistic statements which, in effect, may impede and perhaps make very difficult our negotiations in Paris"), he was in good company, for both his remarks and those of Mr. Laird were of a piece in this respect with an appraisal offered in January 1969 by a close Presidential confidant, Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, that "(the enemy's) . . . situation is deteriorating rather rapidly." And this, in turn, was merely the best news we had received since an assessment in September 1968 by Gen. William Westmoreland, now the Army Chief of Staff and formerly the field commander in Vietnam, that "the enemy is deteriorating."

This word "deteriorating" is much favored among appraisers of the Vietnam War. "Turning the corner" is also a stock item, if that is any comfort to Mr. Laird. In fact, whether the official in question is a general or a President or a Cabinet member, there are patterns here, certain forms to be observed. And so, for the convenience of those officials who cannot resist the impulse, as well as for the edification of those who might see some purpose in trying to fight it—given the past record—what follows are some selected quotations from the last 15 years:

" . . . We have never been in a better relative position." *General Westmoreland, April 10, 1968.*

" . . . We have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view . . . The enemy has many problems: He is losing control of the scattered population under his influence . . . He sees the strength of his forces steadily declining . . . His monsoon offensives have been failures. He was dealt a mortal blow by the installation of a freely elected representative government . . . the enemy's hopes are bankrupt." *General Westmoreland, Nov. 21, 1967.*

" . . . We are generally pleased . . . we are very sure we are on the right track." *President Johnson, July 13, 1967.*

" . . . Progress has been made. . . . We have pushed the enemy farther and farther into the jungles. . . . We have succeeded

in attaining our objectives." *General Westmoreland, July 13, 1967.*

"I expect the . . . war to achieve very sensational results in 1967." *Ambassador Lodge, Jan. 9, 1967.*

"We are beginning to see some signs of success," and "There is an erosion of [enemy] morale." *Secretary of State Rusk, Aug. 25, 1966.*

"We have stopped losing the war." *Secretary of Defense McNamara, October, 1965.*

" . . . We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves." *President Johnson, Oct. 21, 1964.*

"The war in Vietnam is on the right track." *Ambassador Lodge, June 30, 1964.*

"I think the number [of U.S. personnel] in Vietnam is not likely to increase substantially." *Secretary of Defense McNamara, May 14, 1964.*

" . . . The Vietnamese . . . themselves can handle this problem primarily with their own effort." *Secretary of State Rusk, Feb. 24, 1964.*

"The United States still hopes to withdraw its troops from South Vietnam by the end of 1965." *Secretary of Defense McNamara, Feb. 19, 1964.*

"I am hopeful we can bring back additional . . . men . . . because I personally believe this is a war the Vietnamese must fight. I don't believe we can take on that combat task for them." *Secretary of Defense McNamara, Feb. 3, 1964.*

"Victory . . . is just months away, and the reduction of American advisors can begin any time now. . . . I can safely say the end of the war is in sight." *Gen. Paul D. Harkins, Commander of the Military Assistance Command in Saigon, Oct. 31, 1963.*

"Secretary McNamara and General [Maxwell] Taylor reported their judgment that the major part of the U.S. military task can be completed by the end of 1965. . . ." *White House statement, Oct. 2, 1963.*

"I feel we shall achieve victory in 1964." *Tram Van Dong, South Vietnamese general, Oct. 1, 1963.*

". . . South Vietnam is on its way to victory . . ." *Frederick E. Nolting, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, June 12, 1963.*

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"The South Vietnamese themselves are fighting their own battle, fighting well." *Secretary of State Rusk, April 1963.*

"[The struggle] is turning an important corner." *Secretary of State Rusk, March 8, 1963.*

". . . The corner has definitely been turned toward victory in South Vietnam." *Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense, March 8, 1963.*

"There are definitely encouraging elements . . . the ratio of casualties . . . indicates some turning in the situation." *Secretary of State Rusk, Feb. 1, 1963.*

"The war in Vietnam is going well and will succeed." *Secretary McNamara, Jan. 31, 1963.*

". . . The South Vietnamese should achieve victory in three years. . . . I am confident the Vietnamese are going to win the war. [The Vietcong] face inevitable defeat." *Adm. Harry D. Felt, U.S. Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Forces, Jan. 12, 1963.*

"Every quantitative measurement shows we're winning the war. . . ." "U.S. aid to Vietnam has reached a peak and will start to level off." *Secretary of Defense McNamara, 1962.*

"The Communists now realize they can never conquer free Vietnam." *Gen. J. W. O'Daniel, Official Military Aide to Vietnam, Jan. 8, 1961.*

". . . The American aid program in Vietnam has proved an enormous success, one of the major victories of American policy. . . ." *Gen. J. W. O'Daniel, Official Military Aide to Vietnam, Sept. 7, 1959.*

"With a little more training the Vietnamese Army will be the equal of any other army. . ." *Secretary of the Army Wilbur Brucker, Dec. 18, 1955.*

"I fully expect (only) six more months of hard fighting." *General Navarre, French Commander-in-Chief, Jan. 2, 1954.*